

# 1

## Karma

Moral and psychological ethics of the early Buddhist texts  
A study by Piya Tan ©2005

### 1 A very short history of karma

**1.1 EARLY ORIGINS.** Scholars generally agree that belief in karma has very ancient roots in Indian religions. **Wilhelm Halbfass** says that the doctrines of karma and rebirth were “fully established and almost universally accepted as a comprehensive world-view in classical and later Indian thought” (1980: 269). **Bruce Reichenbach**, noting that the law of karma is “embedded in a body of philosophical and religious doctrines,” gives a more detailed survey (1990:10-23). So embedded is the belief in rebirth in ancient India, that it forms part of the common religious heritage (at least in terminology and form) against which the Buddha defines his teachings.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the roots of karma in Indian thought go back to Vedic times, perhaps earlier.

The theory of *karman* [karma] is the first significant attempt in the history of human speculation to explain a man’s destiny in terms of his own personal endeavours. The stress on one’s own efforts as the sure path to moral purification and personal illumination is the first significant protest against the tribal notions of collective responsibility. *Karman* heralds the theory of individualism, and, if at the religious level it is opposed to divine predestination and to despotism of God at the social level, it is opposed to the tribal notion of morality which emphasizes the gens (the *communitas*) as the unit and which does not concern itself with the apportionment of justice according to one’s deserts. Thus it could be said that the theory of *karman* is a great individualistic protest against the tribal canons of morality. (Varma 1963:35 f; emphases added)

This paragraph is clearly the key point of VP Varma’s paper, “The origins and sociology of the early Buddhist philosophy of moral determinism” (1963). Let us have a short historical overview of karma before discussing its finer aspects in the light of Buddhism.

The notion of karma is the first significant idea in history that puts human destiny, indeed the fate of all living beings, in their own hands. Karma works on the basis of personal effort as the sure path of moral purity and spiritual liberation. With an understanding and acceptance of karma, the tribal member now stands out as separate individuals, each responsible for his own salvation. It rejects the notion of a capricious and arbitrary *all-powerful being* who punishes and rewards his (or her) creatures through whimsical fiats. Karma is also opposed to the idea of *the natural determinism* of a mechanical order that explains human fate in terms of the motions of atoms and molecules. It is a self-operating universal moral law that embraces every single living being.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the doctrine of karma is still not totally clear.<sup>3</sup> The word *karman*<sup>4</sup> originally simply meant what was done, that is, a deed or action. The modern notion of karma was unknown to the writers of the Vedas, where this *karman*—deed or action—simply refers to *the Vedic sacrifice*. Only later, it is understood more broadly as referring both to actions and their consequences. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa hints at rebirth by referring to a series of deaths which a person undergoes, but this is not strong enough as evidence of a karma teaching.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Hoffman 1987:74 f.

<sup>2</sup> See VP Varma, “Early Buddhist philosophy of moral determinism,” 1963:35-47. However, karma is not the only natural law that affects us. There are, according to Comys, the 5 “natural orders” (*pañca, niyāma*), viz, the laws of energy (*utu, niyāma*), of heredity (*bīja, niyāma*), of karma (*kamma, niyāma*), of mental processes (*citta, niyāma*), and of nature (*dhamma, niyāma*) (DA 2:432; DhsA 272): see SD 5.7.5b(2).

<sup>3</sup> For a useful summary, see Reichenbach 1990:10-23 (ch 2).

<sup>4</sup> *Karman* (karma) comes from √kr, “to do.”

<sup>5</sup> “The threat of repeated deaths, in the case of heretics incapable of performing the sacrificial rites, as seen from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, though indicating the possibility of one or more rebirth, is far from

However, there is enough evidence to assert that the people of this period had confidence that their ritual action had consequences which were sufficient to affect their life after death. Specifically, rites were performed to prevent the ancestors from leaving some sort of heaven and thus suffering repeated deaths.<sup>6</sup> (Reichenbach 1990:10)

Anyway, it is most likely that it was only in **the Upaniṣads** that karma first appeared as a distinct (albeit esoteric) teaching, and its meaning was broadened to include actions that determine the conditions of human rebirth. However, it is still not clear to what extent it was accepted as a popular doctrine at that time.<sup>7</sup>

**1.2 YĀJÑAVALKYA.** The period between around 700-500 BCE, that is, up to the Buddha's time, saw the beginning of philosophy and mysticism marked by the Upaniṣads ("sittings near a teacher"). The most important of these texts are two oldest, the Bṛhad Āraṇyaka ("the great forest texts") and the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (pertaining to the Chandogas, a class of brahmin specially connected with the intonation of hymns at sacrifices). Both these texts record the traditions of certain seers (*ṛṣi*; P *isi*) of the time, notably Yajñavalkya, who was a pioneer of new religious ideas. An example of Yajñavalkya's teaching is found in this famous dialogue:

**11** "Yājñavalkya," said Jāratkāra Ārtabhāga, "when such a person [a liberated sage] dies, do the vital breaths (*prāṇa*) move up from him or do they not?"

"No," replied Yājñavalkya. "They are gathered together in him. He bloats up, he swells up and thus bloated the dead man lies."

**12** "Yājñavalkya," said he, "when such a person dies, what is it that does not leave him?" "The name. Infinite is the name, infinite are all the devas: thereby (knowing thus) he wins the infinite world."

**13** "Yajñavalkya," said he, "when this dead person's speech [voice] goes into fire, the breath into air [wind], the eye into the sun, the mind into the moon, hearing into the quarters, the self into space [ether], the body hairs into the plants, the head hairs into the trees, and the blood and the semen into the water—what then becomes of this person?"

"Ārtabhāga, my friend, take my hand. Only we two shall know of this: neither of us shall make public of this."

The two went away and discussed. What they said was karma and what they praised was karma, namely, that by good works one becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works one becomes evil (*pāpa*). Then, Jāratkāra Ārtabhāga kept silent. (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2.11-13)

We have here a good example of the Upaniṣadic tradition of transmitting teachings in "secret" (*rahasyam*).<sup>8</sup> Scholars like Wendy O'Flaherty,<sup>9</sup> however, have suggested that "karma" here refers to the *religious works*, especially the Vedic sacrifice. "But," disagrees KG Zysk, "if this were Yājñavalkya's intention there would be no point in secrecy, for it was common knowledge that performing sacrifices

being identical with the theory of transmigration as current in the Hindu belief" (AN Upadhye, "Jainism and karma doctrine." *The Jaina Antiquary* 2 1936:8 f. Wendy O'Flaherty regards this as the theory of "re-death" ("Karma and rebirth in the Vedas and Purāṇas" in O'Flaherty 1980:3.

<sup>6</sup> David M Knipe, "*Sapiṇḍīkarana*: The Hindu rite of entry into heaven," in Frank Reynolds & Earle H Waugh (eds), *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the history and anthropology of religions*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977:112.

<sup>7</sup> See Reichenbach 1990:11 f & nn.

<sup>8</sup> The Buddha's declaration that "the Tathāgata has no 'guru's fist' in respect of teachings" (D 16.2.25a/ 2:100), is clearly in connection with such secret transmissions. The Tibetan tradition of "secret teachings" is probably directly rooted in this ancient Indian tradition but given a Buddhist garb. See P Deussen 1906 & G Obeyesekere 1980:160.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy O'Flaherty, "Karma and rebirth in the Vedas and Purāṇas," 1980:xiii, 3-37.

provided beneficial spiritual results. The idea that every deed bears results in the future, however, must have been a very new one” (Basham 1989:128 n11). The point here is that the mechanics (the everyday reality) of rituals was public knowledge (since the idea was to attract devotees), but their dynamics (the hidden agenda) was privileged knowledge of the priests who prohibited anyone else to perform the rituals.

I think that there is another explanation for this secrecy. While it might be true that karma as “sacrifice” (*yajña*) and “duty” (*dharma*) (such as showing deference to the brahmin priests) were common in pre-Buddhist India, religious ritual was performed and perpetuated by just that notion: that *karman* is *yajña* (sacrifice). The success of such a sacrament (meaning a religious office controlled by a class of priests) depends on maintaining some kind of information not available to the masses. Such secret knowledge creates and maintains a social distance between the classes, making them workable. Yājñavalkya is discussing with Ārthabhāga *on a professional level*—“professional” here meaning both in connection with what they believe and as co-entrepreneurs of the same religious commerce—so that the non-professionals, the non-brahmins, would not get the better of priestly trade secrets.

**1.3 TRIBAL ORIGINS.** It is also possible that the doctrine of karma is not of Aryan origin, but the Aryans later adopted it from indigenous religion. However, **George L Hart III** has argued that it was not of Dravidian origin, on the grounds that their descendents, the Tamils, received the doctrine of reincarnation around the 5<sup>th</sup> century from Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that rebirth originated in the indigenous tribes of the eastern Gangetic plain where rice was a staple crop. This is based on the possible connection between rebirth, and the *śrāddha* (ancestral) rite and *piṇḍa* (rice ball) offering.<sup>11</sup>

The tribal notion of karma, however, was not *ethicized*, that is, the tribes believed that rebirth transferred individuals to some other world where they stayed until they were reborn. Where they went after that was not determined by their moral acts, nor was it a place of reward or punishment. Summarizing Obeyesekere’s hypothesis on the ethicization of the Gangetic tribal religions, Reichenbach says:<sup>12</sup>

Ethicization—the imposition of religious assessment of moral action—was accomplished either by the activity of a highly specialized priesthood (as in Hinduism), by the development of ethical asceticism, or by Indian religious philosophers to meet their special proselytization needs. And it was ethicization that led to the transformation of a tribal, non-ethical rebirth eschatology into the karma eschatology. (Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, 1990:12)

## 2 As we sows, so we shall reap?

**2.1** A popular definition of karma is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta**<sup>13</sup> (S 11.10) in the Sagāthā Vagga, the very first book (*vagga*) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya:

Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;  
Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—  
He who has planted the seed shall taste the fruit.<sup>14</sup> (S 903/11.10/1:227), SD 39.13

This verse or its popular version—“as we sow, so we shall reap”—has often been quoted as a Buddhist article of faith. The interesting point here is that this stanza (*gāthā*), included in **the Sa, gāthā Vagga** (the first chapter) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, actually belongs to the free floating ancient gnomic

<sup>10</sup> George L Hart III, “The theory of reincarnation among the Tamils,” in O’Flaherty 1980:116-133.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy O’Flaherty, 1980:xvi f.

<sup>12</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, “The rebirth eschatology and its transformations,” in O’Flaherty 1980:137-164.

<sup>13</sup> Also called **Isayo Samuddaka S** or **Sambara Samuddaka S**. An almost identical saying, “By good works a man becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works evil (*pāpa*),” attributed to the Vedic sage Yājñavalkya and secretly transmitted to another sage, Jāratkāra (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2). See Basham 1989:43 f.

<sup>14</sup> Yadisam vappate bījam, tādisam harate phalam | kalyāṇa, kārī kalyāṇam, pāpa, kārī ca pāpakam | pavuttam vappate bījam, phalam paccanubhossasī ti.

poetry of India which the Buddhists have preserved.<sup>15</sup> In other words, this is technically not “Buddha Word” (*Buddha, vacana*) but a popular saying. Only what is truly “well-said” (*subhāsita*)—that which lessens or removes greed, hate and delusion—is regarded as Buddha Word.

**2.2** The background of this popular “sower’s karma” saying is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta** (S 1:227), where a Buddhist myth relates an impending battle between the gods and the asuras (“titans”),<sup>16</sup> the latter (according to the account) dwelled in the great ocean. Some virtuous seers who dwelled on the ocean shore, fearing that the asuras would destroy their hermitage as had occurred before, requested “a guarantee of safety” (*abhaya, dakkhiṇa*) from Sambara, the asura leader.

However, Sambara, who detested the seers for being “the hated devotees of Sakra (the lord of the devas)” (*duṭṭhānam sakka, sevinam*), replied, “I will give you only fear!” The terrified seers resorted to putting a curse on Sambara:

Though we have asked for safety, you give us but fear.  
Having received this from you, may fear without end be yours!

Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;  
Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—  
He who has planted the seed shall taste the fruit! (S 902 f/11.10/1:227), SD 39.13

It is said that as soon as Sambara fell asleep, he woke up howling as if struck from all sides by a hundred spears. The other asuras rushed to comfort him until the break of dawn. Henceforth, his sickened mind trembled; hence his other name, Vepa, citti (*cittam vepati*) (SA 1:347).

**2.3** Another popular notion of karma is found in **the Ayyakā Sutta** (S 3.22), where the Buddha consoles Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, on account of the loss of his beloved grandmother:

**431** All beings will die,  
For life ends in death.  
They will fare according to their karma.  
Following the fruits of good and evil—  
Evil deeds are hell.  
And good deeds heaven [happy destinies].

**432** Therefore one should do what is good  
To pile it up for the future life.  
Merits support the living beings  
In the other world. (S 431 f/3.22/1:97)

Here we see the Buddha consoling the grieving rajah with a simple popular truth without going into deep teachings which the rajah was not ready for anyway. Understandably, this is only a “provisional” teaching without any mention of the way of the samsara that karma supports.

### 3 Karma and intention

**3.1 KARMA IS NOT FATE.** The Sāmyutta statements on karma (S 431 f, 902 f), as such, should be understood in their respective contexts as folk sayings. They are not fully reflective of the Buddhist teaching of karma, especially since such folk notions may encourage a determinist or fatalist view of karma.

<sup>15</sup> Winternitz 1933 2:57 f. Another example of the ancient Indian gnomic tradition is **Ālavaka S** (Sn 1.10), which is a riddle in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form, given by the yaksha Ālavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” and “Good wine needs no bush” are English gnomes.

<sup>16</sup> “Asuras,” (*asurā*), lit “anti-god,” variously tr as “titan,” “demon”. They were once gods in Tāvatiṃsa but fell from their state through being intoxicated with drinks. Their attempted return to Tāvatiṃsa resulted in protracted battles with the gods led by Sakra (S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f).

Karma, however, is not “fate” in the usual worldly sense of the word. Buddhism does not subscribe to the notion of a creator-God or divine will or providence, but teaches that salvation and liberation can be achieved through self-effort. The point is very clear here: *God (if he exists) may forgive you, but karma does not. As such, karmic ethics entails a greater sense of personal accountability.*<sup>17</sup>

If we truly understand the law of karma, then we do not believe in the notion of inexorable fate. Even though much of what we are comes from past karma, we can, if we try hard enough (using the right spiritual means), change our present conditions for the better. Those who do not understand the nature of karma and resign themselves to “fate” are known as *fatalists*. To be a Buddhist is not to be a fatalist.

Karma is a natural law which works by itself. The chief cause of karma is ignorance (*avijjā*), or not knowing things as they truly are. Associated with ignorance is its pernicious ally, craving (*taṇhā*), the other cause of karma. All the good deeds of a worldling (*puṭhujjana*), that is, an unawakened being, though associated with the three wholesome roots of generosity, goodwill and wisdom, are nevertheless regarded as karma because the two roots of ignorance and craving still lie dormant in them.

The Buddhist conception of karma is perhaps the most complicated version of the Indian idea, as will be apparent from our study of **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99.1). In this sutta, the sentence ‘Whatever experienceable karma [that do entail a consequence] (*vedanīyaṃ kammaṃ*) that a person does, he would experience the result of that karma’ (A 3.99)<sup>18</sup> means that a man must reap what he has sown.<sup>19</sup> In fact, **H C Warren**, despite rendering *bhikkhū* as “priests,” gives an insightful translation of the sentence as:

O priests, if any one were to say that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. (*Buddhism in Translations*, 1896:221; emphasis added)

And Warren similarly renders well the closing sentence:

But if anyone says, O priests, that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery. (id; emphasis added)

**Luis Gomez**, on the other hand, renders the clause, *vedanīyaṃ kammaṃ*, as “acts that do entail a consequence,” explaining that there are also “those (acts) that do not entail a fruit,” adding,

Moreover, the nature of consequence does not necessarily correspond or is not directly proportional to the nature or intensity of the act, for the final result depends on the maturation of the fruit, the *vipāka*, and this maturation depends on the soil in which the act is, so to speak, planted.<sup>20</sup> (Gomez 1975:83)

If we take “experienceable” (*vedanīyaṃ*) here as qualifying “karma” (*kammaṃ*), then we can also take it as distinguishing “experienceable karma” (one’s personal action) from the Vedic *karma* or ritual. In that case, the Buddha here is simply rejecting the efficacy of the brahminical sacrifices and ritual (*karma*), for example, whatever we offer we would receive the same in due course or in future lives, or that such rituals do not bring us any spiritual liberation.

**3.2 KARMA AS INTENTION.** The anglicized term “karma,” originally a Sanskrit word (Pali *kamma*), refers to the law of moral cause and effect that operates automatically for all beings—human, divine, and all

<sup>17</sup> See eg Gwynne Dyer, “Does religion do more harm than good?” Japan Times, 22 Mar 2007; also in The Straits Times, 22 Mar 2007. <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20070322gd.html>. Gwynne Dyer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

<sup>18</sup> A 3.99.1/3:249 @ SD 3.5.

<sup>19</sup> Compare this to the seers’ curse (and gnome) mentioned earlier here: “Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be.” [2]

<sup>20</sup> On a plant imagery—karma as seeds—see **(Kamma) Nidāna Sutta** (A 3.33/1:134-136).

life—throughout the universe. The doctrine of karma was prevalent in India even before the Buddha. However, it was the Buddha who formulated and explained it in the most complete spiritual manner.

Generally speaking, karma means “action” or “deed.” It is any kind of intentional action whether bodily, verbal or mental. In **the Nibbedhika Sutta** (A 6.63), the Buddha gives the classic definition of karma as:

Volition, bhikshus, is karma, I say! Having intended, one creates karma through body, speech and mind.

*Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā.*

(A 6.63/3:415 @ SD 6.11)

All intentional acts, good or evil, generates karma. In its ultimate sense, karma refers to all moral and immoral volition (*kusalākusala, cetanā*). Involuntary or unintentional actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute karma, because volition, the most important factor in determining karma, is absent.

A person’s *intention* and his *motive* are not necessarily always the same. **Damien Keown** distinguishes between the two: motive or motivation concerns the ultimate aim of an action, while intention concerns its more immediate goal, an objective on the way to attaining an ultimate aim (1995:62). This is of course a modern distinction, but the new term “motive” helps us discuss some contemporary issues in the light of the Buddha’s teachings of moral ethics.

Take, for example, the case where we have found some trapped animals which we know would surely be killed. We do not break any precept if we are to release them, without any intention to steal them.<sup>21</sup> According to **Peter Harvey**, the moral ethics here is whether we regard the animals as property or as sentient beings.<sup>22</sup> If our motive is to release the animals out of compassion, then it is karmically wholesome, and no precept is broken. This is because animals are sentient beings, too.

**3.3 GUARDING THE MIND.** The most important factor in the working of karma is the conscious mind. The first two verses of **the Dhammapada** says:

The mind (*mano*) precedes all states;  
The mind is their chief; mind-made are they:  
If, with an impure mind, one speaks or acts,  
Suffering follows one like a wheel that dogs an ox’s foot.      (Dh 1)

The mind (*mano*) precedes all states;  
The mind is their chief; mind-made are they:  
If, with an pure mind, one speaks or acts,  
Happiness follows one like a shadow that leaves not.      (Dh 2)

**The Attha, sālīnī**, the Commentary on the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī (the first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka), adds:

When the mind is unguarded, physical action is unguarded; speech also is unguarded; thought also is unguarded. When the mind is guarded, physical action is guarded; speech also is guarded; and thought also is guarded.      (DhsA 68)

Every volitional action of living beings, except those of Buddhas and arhats, is called *karma*. These exceptions are because Buddhas and arhats have effectively given up both good and evil; they have transcended moral relativism.<sup>23</sup> They have eradicated both ignorance and craving, the causes of karma. In other words, their actions are not motivated by the three unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion.<sup>24</sup> Since their actions clearly benefit those who associate with them, such saints are said to be compassionate.

However, Buddhas and arhats do face the *results* of some past karma should the right conditions arise, but they do not react negatively to such situations as unawakened people would. Such karmic results only

<sup>21</sup> See V 3:62.

<sup>22</sup> See Harvey 1999:279.

<sup>23</sup> See SD 18.7(2).

<sup>24</sup> See (**Kusalākusal, mūla**) **Nidāna S** (A 3.33/1:134-136), SD 18.1.

affect them bodily but not mentally.<sup>25</sup> It is also in their power to prevent or postpone the result of such karma, if they should wish to.

#### 4 Buddhist usages of the term “karma”

**4.0** The word *kamma* (Skt *karma*) comes from the root √KṚ (to do); hence, etymologically, karma (an anglicized word found in the larger English dictionaries) means simply “action.” In pre-Buddhist Vedic times, *karma* meant “sacrifice, ritual” done as a *dharma* (duty). But in early Buddhism, their meanings are changed to mean “intention, deliberate action” and “true teaching, true reality,” respectively.

Although it is common to say in Buddhism today that an unintentional action is not karma, properly speaking, it should be understood that (at least in the case of unawakened beings) any action rooted in one of the six roots—three unwholesome and three wholesome roots—is karma. As long as we are not awakened, our actions are somehow rooted in this manner.<sup>26</sup>

This definition of karma is the most common in Buddhism, but it is a very general one. **Payutto**, in his study on karma entitled *Good, Evil and Beyond*, mentions and discusses the following four important meanings of karma, namely, intention, conditioning factor, personal responsibility, and social occupation (1993).<sup>27</sup> We will examine these in turn here

**4.1 KARMA AS INTENTION.** Essentially, karma is intention (*cetanā*),<sup>28</sup> and it includes the sense of volition, choice and decision, that is, the mental impetus that leads to action through body, speech or mind.<sup>29</sup> **Intention** is what drives and directs all our actions, knowingly done and unknowingly done,<sup>30</sup> creative and destructive. As such, the Buddha declares in **the Nibbedhika Sutta** (A 6.63) that it is the essence of kamma, “Intention, bhikshus, is karma, I say! Having willed, we create karma through body, speech and mind” [3].<sup>31</sup>

Payutto makes this insightful observation regarding intention:

At this point we might take some time to broaden our understanding of this word “intention.” “Intention” in the context of Buddhism has a much subtler meaning than it has in common usage. In the English language, we tend to use the word when we want to provide a link between internal thought and its resultant external actions. For example, we might say, “I didn’t intend to do it,” “I didn’t mean to say it” or “She did it intentionally.”

But according to the teachings of Buddhism, all actions and speech, all thoughts, no matter how fleeting, and the responses of the mind to sensations received through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, without exception, contain elements of intention. Intention is thus the mind’s volitional choosing of objects of awareness; it is the factor which leads the mind to turn towards, or be repelled from, various objects of awareness, or to proceed in any particular direction; it is the guide or the governor of how the mind responds to stimuli; it is the force which plans and organizes the movements of the mind, and ultimately it is that which determines the states experienced by the mind. (Payutto 1993:6 f; emphases added)

A moment of intention is a moment of karma, and when there is karma, there is potential result. Karma does not arise in measured amounts, but way of a network of mental activities and external events, interacting through the body, speech and mind (through the media of the six senses). These “karmic moments” are like tiny specks of dust, to use Payutto’s simile. We may not notice it, but little speck of dust are right now, all the time, slowly surreptitiously settling everywhere around us, even on us. Every

<sup>25</sup> See esp **Sallatthena S** (S 36.6/4:207-210), SD 5.5.

<sup>26</sup> On the roots (*mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69/1:201-205), SD 18.2.

<sup>27</sup> 1993:8-11. Payutto gives the last as “social activity or career.”

<sup>28</sup> **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63, 11.2/3:415) + n, SD 6.11; Kvu 393.

<sup>29</sup> See **(Vitthāra) Kamma S** (A 4.232/2:230-232), SD 4.13 (2).

<sup>30</sup> On how karma can be unconscious, see **The unconscious mind**, SD 17.8b.

<sup>31</sup> A 6.63/3:415 @ SD 6.11.

deed we do is like a speck of dust slowly and surely settling inside our karmic memory as latent tendencies. Every time we get angry reinforces the tendency that we will get angry again in the future. Every time we do a good deed reinforces the tendency that we will do good again. And so our karmic personality is moulded depending on the nature of our actions.

A destructive intention does not have to be on a gross level. It may, for example, lead to the destruction of only a very small thing, such as when we angrily tear up a piece of paper. Even though that piece of paper has no importance in itself, the action still has some effect on the quality of the mind. The effect is very different from tearing up a piece of paper with a neutral state of mind, such as when throwing away scrap paper. If there is repeated implementation of such angry intention, the effects of accumulation will become clearer and clearer, and may develop to more significant levels.

Consider the specks of dust which come floating unnoticed into a room; there isn't one speck which is void of consequence. It is the same for the mind. But the weight of that consequence, in addition to being dependent on the amount of mental "dust," is also related to the quality of the mind. For instance, specks of dust which alight onto a road surface have to be of a very large quantity before the road will seem to be dirty. Specks of dust which alight onto a floor, although of a much smaller quantity, may make the floor seem dirtier than the road. A smaller amount of dust accumulating on a table top will seem dirty enough to cause irritation. An even smaller amount alighting on a mirror will seem dirty and will interfere with its functioning. A tiny speck of dust on a spectacle lens is perceptible and can impair vision. In the same way, volition or intention, no matter how small, is not void of fruit. (Payutto 1993:7 f)

In the same way, the mind has varying levels of refinement or clarity, depending on accumulated karma. As long as the mind works on a coarse worldly level, no problem may be apparent, but when the mind is geared into a more refined level, past unwholesome karma, even of a small scale, may prove an obstacle. This is why many people initially face difficulties when beginning to meditate. However, when the new habit of directing the mind in a wholesome direction is sustained, a new more powerful energy arises. In **the Citta Sambhūta Jātaka** (J 498), the rajah Avanti declares:

<i>Sabbaṃ narānaṃ saphalaṃ suciṇṇaṃ</i>	All men's deeds well done bear fruit,
<i>na kammaṇā kiñcana moghaṃ atthi</i>	no karma whatsoever is ever empty.

(J 498/4:390)

Payutto attributes this quote to the Buddha, but it is actually spoken by the rajah Avanti, but the verses are canonical. A similar verse on karma—"Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be"—has been mentioned above [2] as a popular saying, is technically not Buddha Word. Either these are popular views of ancient India or are prevalent during the commentarial times. In the light of Buddha Dharma, these sayings mean that whatever karma we have done, there is the potential of its fruit.

However, as pointed out by **the (Kusalākusala) Sañcetanika Sutta 1** (A 10.206), it is not the case that every karma's fruit must take effect—as if by way of repaying all of our debts at once—before we are awakened. It is impossible to clear away all our karma accumulated over countless aeons. To a certain extent, karma is like debts that accumulate whose interests we may have to pay when the debtor comes to our door. Yet, it is not a mathematical mountain of karma that we accumulate, but rather as seeds of latent tendencies that we collect, and which we destroy when we are liberated.<sup>32</sup>

**4.2 KARMA AS PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.** Karma not only works *within* ourselves (that is, psychologically), but also affects others and the world around us, that is, karma works on personal, interpersonal and social levels.<sup>33</sup> While as a conditional factor, karma is purely mental [4.3], here it refers to the expression of the mind through speech and bodily actions. This is our conduct from an ethical per-

<sup>32</sup> A 10.206/5:292-297 @ SD 3.9. On how karma is destroyed like seeds, see **(Kamma) Nidāna S** (A 3.33.2c/1:134-136), SD 4.14.

<sup>33</sup> For group karma, see SD 39.1.



spective, either in the immediate moment, or in a wider sense, including the past and the future. This is the meaning of karma that is most often found in the texts, where it occurs as an admonition to wholesome and responsible actions, as stated in **the Tapanīya Sutta** (It 30):

Bhikshus, these two conditions conduce to torment. What are the two?

Here, bhikshus, there is a certain person who has done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for himself. He has done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong.

He is tormented, thinking:

“I have done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for myself. I have done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong!”<sup>34</sup>

These, bhikshus, are the two conditions that conduce to torment. (It 2.1.3/25)

Payutto cautions, “It is worth noting that these days, not only is karma almost exclusively taught from this perspective, but it is also treated largely from the perspective of past lives.” (1993:10). An understanding of karma in all its ethical and psychological aspects is helpful building a wholesome self-understanding, personal development, and social and ecological environment.

#### 4.3 KARMA AS OCCUPATION

**4.3.1 We are what we do:** our occupation and preoccupation influence us in profound and far-reaching ways. The work we do is not only a means of self-support, but is also an expression of how we relate to others. *Our professions, lifestyles and social relationships have karmic significance:* they affect society which in turn affects us. Here we see karma working on a large-scale dynamic network. In **the Vāsetṭha Sutta** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), it is said:<sup>35</sup>

- 612 Who amongst humans, makes his living by cattle-herding (*go,rakkha*)<sup>36</sup> is a farmer (*kassaka*), not a brahmin;
- 613 who...makes a living by the various arts is an artiste (*sippika*)....
- 614 who...makes a living by business (*vohāra*) is a merchant (*vāṇija*)...
- 615 who...makes a living by serving others is a servant (*pessika*)....
- 616 who...makes a living by the not-given is a thief (*cora*)....
- 617 who...makes a living by archery (*issattha*) is a soldier (*yodhājīva*)....
- 618 who...makes a living by serving as a purohit [chaplain] (*porohicca*) is a sacrificer (*yājaka*)...
- 619 who...rules the land is a rajah (*rāja*), not a brahmin....
- 620 I call him not a brahmin, born of a mother’s womb:  
he is called “sir” (*bho,vādī*) merely for his material wealth—  
he who has nothing, who grasps at nothing, him I call a brahmin.
- 621 He who trembles not through having cut off all fetters,  
free from sensual attachment,<sup>37</sup> is a brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*), I say. ...
- 650 Neither by birth is one a brahmin, nor by birth a non-brahmin,  
by deeds [karma] is one a brahmin, by deeds is one not a brahmin.
- 651 By deeds is one a farmer,...an artist,...a merchant,...a servant,

<sup>34</sup> In **Abhaya S** (A 4.184.4), this line follows: “Hereafter, sir, I shall go to the destiny of those who have done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for themselves, done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong!” The **Abhaya S** gives a more detailed version of this quote (A 4.184/2:173-176), SD 14.8. The briefest versions are found as (**Duccarita**) **Tapanīya S** (A 2.1.3/1:49) & (**Sucarita**) **Atapanīya S** (A 2.1.4/1:49 f).

<sup>35</sup> All these statements are in some way found in Dh 383-423 (ch 26 Brāhmaṇa Vagga).

<sup>36</sup> Here “farmer” is *kassaka*, and his trade is called *kasi*, but is here paired with *go,rakkha* instead (which is pastoral farming, anyway).

<sup>37</sup> “Free from sensual attachment,” *saṅgātigaṃ visarīyuttarī*, lit “not yoked to coupling”: there is a clear hint of the celibate life here. Apparently, the Buddha is using the term “brahmin” as a synonym for *bhikkhu*: see Dh 383-423 (ch 26 Brāhmaṇa Vagga).

- 652 By deeds is one a thief,... a soldier,... a sacrificer,... a rajah....  
 653 Thus the wise sees karma as it really is:  
 he sees dependent arising, experienced regarding karma and its results.  
 654 The world turns on karma; humanity runs on karma:  
 beings, like a linch-pin of a moving chariot, have karma as their bonds.  
 (M 98.10-61/2:196 = Sn 3.9/612-654/119-123, selected & abridged), SD 37.1

We are what we do, whether our actions are bodily, verbal, or mental. Karma can be deliberate and planned, or habitual, or unknowingly done. Karma arises through our own actions or through being instigated by others. Similarly, we can instigate others into action, and as such be the cause of karma. Karma is both *commission* (doing something) and *omission* (not doing something), because either way we can contribute to events that affect ourselves and others in a positive or a negative way.

*Cetanā*, however, is not “will” in the modern philosophical sense,<sup>38</sup> but it is the mind behind the act (bodily, verbal or mental), one that has an unwholesome root (*lobha*, greed; *dosa*, hate; *moha*, delusion), or a wholesome root (*alobha*, non-greed = generosity; *adosa*, non-hate = lovingkindness; *amoha*, non-delusion = wisdom). In very simple terms, *karma is how we live our lives*.

**4.3.2 Not everything is due to karma.** However, not everything is due to karma. When it is said that we do an action “unintentionally” (*asampajana*), the usual meaning is that we are either unmindful or our attention is not directed towards the object, or that the situation is beyond our control.<sup>39</sup>

For example, we cannot stop a branch that suddenly breaks from a tree and falls to the ground, or prevent the sun from rising (except in stories), or really stop a person’s thought processes. All these, although beyond the scope of karma, are the workings of the other four natural orders (*pañca,niyāma*), namely, the laws of energy (*utu,niyāma*), of heredity (*bīja,niyāma*), of mental processes (*citta,niyāma*), and of nature (*dhamma,niyāma*).<sup>40</sup>

We shall next turn to the most important aspect of karma, that is, as a conditioning factor, or what is sometimes called the saṃskāra theory of karma.

## 5 The saṃskāra theory of karma

**5.1 INTENTION AND CONSEQUENCES.** The Buddhist conception of karma is best called the saṃskāra theory of karma for reasons we shall discuss here.<sup>41</sup> **Damien Keown** has given a definitive explanation of the theory of karma and rebutting views that are against it (1996:335-343), and I here summarize the discussions, adding my own comments where appropriate. Keown begins his discussion by highlighting these three key aspects of karma in Buddhism:

- (1) The Buddha is emphatic that moral acts do have consequences. In a stock passage in the Pali canon [M 130.2-3],<sup>42</sup> the Buddha states that he can see with his clairvoyant powers beings being reborn in various conditions due to their karma. He also rejects the views of six rival teachers who either denied karma or exhibited a faulty understanding of moral causation [D 2.1-33].<sup>43</sup>
- (2) The emphasis placed on the psychological springs of moral action is a feature which distinguishes Buddhist ethics from other contemporaneous doctrines. The connection between karma and inten-

<sup>38</sup> On the origins of the modern notion of “will,” see **Free will**, SD 7.7(6).

<sup>39</sup> In an unawakened mind, any of the 3 unwholesome roots, especially delusion, is always present. See SD 5.7 (2.2.1(5)).

<sup>40</sup> The law of karma is the third of such natural laws (DA 2:432; DhsA 272): see **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21/4:230 f), SD 5.6 (2).

<sup>41</sup> *Saṃskāra* = P *saṅkhāra*; here it refers to *saṅkhāra* as *paccaya* or *nidāna*, ie, the 2<sup>nd</sup> link of dependent arising (the karmically active volitions, responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to samsara), and to the 4<sup>th</sup> aggregate (*khandha*), ie karma both as cause and as effect. See **Saṅkhāra**, SD 17.6 esp (5).

<sup>42</sup> **Deva,dūta S** (M 130.2-3/3:178 f), SD 2.23.

<sup>43</sup> **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.1-333/1:47-59), SD 8.10.

tion is indisputable in Buddhism, and...the Buddha's virtual identification of the two.<sup>44</sup> Buddhism also holds that karma can be produced by volitional action alone and that it is possible to "sin in one's heart" without the performance of a physical act.

- (3) The same act may have different results for different people. A good man who errs in a moment of weakness will not suffer the same consequences as a habitual evildoer who performs the same misdeed. This principle is explained by a simile: a small amount of salt in a cup of water will make it undrinkable, but the same amount of salt placed in the Ganges will have no effect on the purity of the water [A 3.99].<sup>45</sup> (Keown 1996:336)

These three points suggest that early Buddhism regards karma as involving both intentions and consequences. How are intentions and consequences connected? Keown explains

The emphasis placed upon intention and the fact that the same action can have different results for different individuals both suggest that the connection is to be explained in terms of psychology rather than by reference to a transpersonal chain of cause and effect. There seems, however, to be some evidence that the consequences attributed to karma are not purely of a psychological nature. The distinction between these two is made using the term *phalas* to denote the future "fruit" of action and *samskāras* to designate the transformative effect that moral action has upon the character of the agent. (Keown 1996:336; emphases added)

**Reichenbach** explains *phala* and *samskāra* as follows:

*Phalas* include all the immediate effects, visible and invisible, which actions produce or bring about. They are often referred to as the results or fruits of an action. *Samskāras* are the invisible dispositions or tendencies to act, think, experience, or interpret experiences in ways which are conducive to one's happiness or unhappiness, produced in the agent as a result of the action. They constitute, in effect, special modifications of the agent. (Reichenbach 1990:25)

**5.2 SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE RESULTS.** Reichenbach goes on to suggest that there are two kinds of karmic consequences, the "subjective" and the "objective." While *the subjective* result induces or affects us psychologically, *the objective* result determine such things as our physical body on rebirth, social status, and how others act on us. In other words, according to Reichenbach, the former affects our internal environment, the latter our external environment. Keown however disagrees with such a dichotomy:

I suggest, however, that there are not really "two stories" in the sense of two separate causal chains, but one. What is fundamental to the Buddhist understanding of karma, I believe, is the *samskāric* modification of the agent. *Phalas* (referred to in Buddhism as *karmavipāka*) denote not the end product of a transpersonal causal chain but the effect of *samskāric* change as experienced by the actor. In other words, I am suggesting that a coherent account of karma can be given purely in terms of *samskāras*. This is an alternative reading to what I have described above as the "casual consensus" [sic] that understands karma in terms of consequentialism. If this alternative reading is correct, it will call for a significant reassessment of the structure of Buddhist ethics. (Keown 1996:336)

Reichenbach rejects the *samskāra* theory of karma claiming that by itself it cannot explain certain aspects of karma. He raises three objections (1990:27-33):

<sup>44</sup> **Nibbedhika S:** "Intention, bhikshus, is karma, I say! Having willed, one creates karma through body, speech and mind" (A 6.63/3:415), SD 6.11 (I am unable to connect Keown's ref of "A 3:295" at 1996:334 to this context). Keown: "Whether 'intention' adequately captures the meaning of *cetanā* is a matter that calls for more careful examination than it has received to date" (1996:334 n6): see Keown 1992:210-222.

<sup>45</sup> **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99/1:250), SD 3.5.

- (1) Reichenbach's first objection to the saṃskāra theory (1990:27 f). If only *saṃskāras* (Pali *saṅkhāra*) are relevant, then the karmic action is determined largely by the intention, dispositions, character and moral virtue of the agent. As a result, "we could do the most despicable acts, so long as our attitudes and dispositions were correct." (1990:27)

Keown rebuts by saying that this conclusion assumes that a saṃskāric view of karma reduces it to psychology *in all respects*.

However, the consequences which are *suffered* by one who does wrong and the principles which *determine* what is wrong are questions of a very different order. A *saṃskāra* theory of karma is not a normative theory but a theory about moral causation. It says nothing about moral axiology and does not require a commitment to the view that normative principles are reducible to psychological states. There is no contradiction in maintaining both that moral action has a transformative effect on the actor and that transpersonal criteria can be provided for right and wrong.<sup>46</sup>

(Keown 1996:338)

- (2) Reichenbach's second objection to the saṃskāra theory (1990:28-32). If karma were solely explainable in terms of *saṃskāras*, such an explanation would seem to deny any role to the environmental effects of karmic action. He notes that "[l]ength of life, health, and sickness, handsomeness or beauty and ugliness, social position, wealth and poverty, the kind of body and intellectual ability acquired a birth, fortune and misfortune, all are believed to be caused by karma" (1990:31)

Reichenbach's examples apparently come from **the Cūḷa Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135.3), where these seven karmic results are listed, namely: (1) longevity (*āyu*); (2) infirmity (*ābādha*); (3) complexion (*vaṇṇa*); (4) great influence (*mahasakkha*) or little influence (*appesakkha*); (5) wealth (*bhoga*); (6) family status (*kula*); and (7) wisdom (*paññā*).<sup>47</sup> Keown goes on to state that the saṃskāric theory of karma can satisfactorily explain them.

One of the most important functions of karma is to determine the conditions of rebirth. Both physical constitution and (especially in India) social status are determined at birth. A person's organic nature is thought to be directly determined by karma: for example, one can be reborn as a human or an animal, as a male or a female, according to one's deeds. It is thus clearly understood that biological nature is a manifestation of moral nature. If the biological and genetic constitution of individuals is determined by their moral conduct, it is not hard to see where an explanation might lie for karmic effects such as "length of life, health and sickness, handsomeness or beauty and ugliness . . . [and] the kind of body and intellectual ability acquired at birth."

Buddhism certainly holds, for instance, that longevity is influenced by karma and that lifespan is determined at conception. The image used is that of an arrow shot from a bow: life will last until the karmic energy imparted at conception is exhausted (Milinda, paṇḥa 306; Abhidharma, -kośa 2.45ab). What the doctrine of karma seems to be asserting is that what we might call the "intransitive" effects of moral action (namely, those registered at the level of *saṃskāras*) manifest themselves in the physical reality of the new individual in his or her next existence. The self-transformation registered in terms of *saṃskāras*, therefore, modifies what might be termed the "moral DNA" of an individual, and this modified moral code in turn determines the physiology of

<sup>46</sup> Certain kinds of acts, eg, could be intrinsically wrong and punished by karma even if the agent supposed them not to be. The major Buddhist precepts provide examples of such prohibited acts. For a discussion of what makes an act wrong in Buddhism, see Keown 1995:37-64; Harvey 1995. (Keown's fn)

<sup>47</sup> M 135.3/3:203 @ SD 4.15. Reichenbach actually quotes **Mallikā S 1** (A 4.197), where, however, the Buddha explains to queen Mallikā why women vary in their beauty, wealth and influence, but there is no mention of life, health, or wisdom. The Buddha, in his reply, Keown notes (1996:338 n8), clearly shows the correlation between *saṃskāric* factors and physiology (A 4.197/2:202-205).

the new being in the next rebirth. On this basis, karmic effects (1), (2), (3), and (7) above would be explicable by reference to *samskāric* modifications.

The factors I have not yet accounted for are the three “objective” ones, namely, (4) influence, (5) wealth, and (6) family status. The last two, however, are not difficult to explain. Karmic theory holds that like attracts like and that virtuous persons will be drawn to the company of others like themselves. The mechanism of rebirth operates on the basis of affinity such that karma inserts a being into a congruent environment. The virtuous Buddhist layman would thus have every expectation of being reborn into a “good family,” that is to say, one enjoying a privileged status in terms of caste and wealth. This leaves only “influence” to account for. The standard commentarial gloss for this is “retinue” (*parivāra*), which connotes respect and prestige. All three factors are thus related to social status, which, in turn, is closely determined by the circumstances of birth.<sup>48</sup>

(Keown 1996:339; emphases added)

I will only add a short comment. In mentioning that “life will last until the karmic energy imparted at conception is exhausted,” Keown quotes a late Pali work (the *Milinda,pañha*) and an early Mahayana work (the *Abhidharma,kośa*). However, there is a *canonical* reference in this connection found in **the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta** (A 3.15), a short but important sutta that discusses the nature of *saṅkhāra* (that is, the *samskāra* theory of karma).

The Buddha uses the parable of the two wheels to explain how a mental state maintains the present karma:

Then, bhikshus, the chariot-maker set rolling the wheel completed in six days. It kept rolling as long as [112] its momentum lasted,<sup>49</sup> then circled around, and fell to the ground.

Then he set rolling the wheel completed in six months. It kept rolling as long as its momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle!<sup>50</sup>

**3** ‘But, master chariot-maker, what is the cause, what is the condition, that this wheel completed in six days kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, then circled around, and fell to the ground? And, master chariot-maker, what is the cause, what is the condition, that *this* wheel kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle?’

‘Your majesty, as regards the wheel completed in six days, its rim is crooked, full of faults, full of flaws. The spokes, too, are crooked, full of faults, full of flaws. The hub, too, is crooked, full of faults, full of flaws.

On account of the crooked, faulty and flawed rim, the crooked, faulty and flawed spokes, and the crooked, faulty and flawed hub, it kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, then circled around, and fell to the ground.

Your majesty, as regards the wheel completed in six months, less six days, its rim is not crooked, faultless, flawless. The spokes, too, are not crooked, faultless, flawless. The hub, too, is not crooked, faultless, flawless. On account of the uncrooked, faultless and flawless rim, the uncrooked, faultless and flawless spokes, and the uncrooked, faultless and flawless hub, it kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle.

(A 3.15,2-3/1:111 f), SD 17.7

In the above parable of the two wheels, past karma is represented by how each wheel was made, and our mental state maintains the momentum of present karma (*abhisāṅkhārassa gati*), that is, how well we have pushed the wheel at the present moment. The Sutta closes with the Buddha saying that those with “crookedness” (*vaṅka*), that is, the moral flaw in body, speech and mind are like the flawed wheel that

<sup>48</sup> There is clearly also scope for a psychological explanation of how influence and wealth are created or enhanced. (Keown’s fn)

<sup>49</sup> *Abhisāṅkhārassa gati*, which Comy explains as “the exertion applied” (*payogassa gamanāṃ*) (AA 2:181).

<sup>50</sup> Akkhāhatam maññe aṭṭhasi.

quickly falls. Then he admonishes us to abandon the crookedness of the three doors so that we will remain “standing” (*patit̥hitā*) like the well-made wheel.

It is clear from the (Pacetana) *Ratha, kāra Sutta* that our lives could be autopiloted by our past karma, just as the hurriedly made wheel does not work well, unlike the well made wheel. However, the *Sutta* also points out that we need not be automata run by our past, even if much of our present conditions were the result of past deeds. The standing time of either wheel depends on the present momentum it is given. If we use the present well, we can still take charge of one’s karma in a wholesome way. In either case, we should give the wheel a good push.

- (3) Reichenbach’s third objection to the *saṃskāra* theory (1990:32 f). “[T]he restriction of karmic concerns to *saṃskāras* proves unsatisfactory in cases where the action bears fruit in ways which have no obvious connection with the action, or when the happiness or unhappiness experienced and its causes have nothing to do with dispositions or tendencies” (1990:32). Reichenbach gives two examples: (a) As malaria is an unpleasant experience, he says, “this must be the just recompense for some previous misdeed(s)” (id). (b) A burning house: “Since this is a bad experience, the karmic theorist would appeal to some of my previous action(s) to explain why it burned” (id). But how, he asks, can either of these things be explained by the *saṃskāra* theory?

This third objection is based on the assumption that *every pain and misfortune has a karmic cause*. Keown quotes **the *Sīvaka Sutta*** (S 36.21), where the Buddha tells the wanderer *Sīvaka* that this is not the case.<sup>51</sup>

Now, *Sīvaka*, when those recluses and brahmins teach such a teaching, who hold such a view: ‘Whatever a person feels, whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral, all that is due to past deeds’—they deviate from<sup>52</sup> what one should know for oneself, and from the common truth in the world. Therefore, I say that these recluses and brahmins are wrong. (S 36.21.4b/4:230), SD 5.7

Here the Buddha says that suffering can be caused by non-karmic factors such as the action of bodily humours and climatic change. As such, it is not a rule that a misfortune such as a house fire should have a specific karmic cause. The Buddha theory of karma allows the possibility of accidents and incidental misfortune.<sup>53</sup>

**5.3 PAST ROOTS AND PRESENT CONDITIONS.** What has been said thus far does not deny that certain pains and misfortunes can be the direct results of the retribution of past misconduct. Reichenbach mentions (albeit briefly) two specific examples and a general one: (1) *Moggallāna*’s death; (2) the death of a miserly seth of *Sāvatt̥hī*; and (3) a person who steals grain will be reborn as a rat, and the one who eats forbidden food will be reborn as a worm, and so on. It will be demonstrated here that pain and misfortune (or any karmic result for that matter) are not merely the results of past karma, but—as understood by the *saṃskāra* theory—they can be brought about by present *psychological conditions* (rooted in latent tendencies).<sup>54</sup>

**5.3.1 *Moggallāna*’s death.** The first example Reichenbach (1990:20 f) gives is that of a popular account of *Moggallāna*’s death.<sup>55</sup> The *Dhammapada* Commentary version of the story of *Moggallāna*’s death narrates how heretics (*tit̥thiyā*), jealous of the gifts and honour that the public bestow on the Buddha, decide to kill *Moggallāna*, whose psychic powers they regard as the main cause for this. They hire some thieves to kill him, and the *Dhammapada* story continues:

<sup>51</sup> The Buddha makes a similar statement in ***Deva, dāha S*** (M 101,2/2:214), SD 18.4, and ***Tit̥th’āyatana S*** (A 3.61/1:173-177), SD 6.8.

<sup>52</sup> “They deviate from,” *atidhāvanti*, also “run past, transgress, go too far” (CPD).

<sup>53</sup> Keown: We may note in passing that many illnesses have psychological causes and that many accidents are traceable to human error or negligence. The *saṃskāra* theory would therefore explain many cases of these kinds. (1996:340 n11)

<sup>54</sup> On latent tendencies (*anusaya*), see ***Sall’atthēna S*** (S 36.6/4:207-210), SD 5.5 Intro, & ***Madhu, piṇḍika S*** (M 18/1:108-114), SD 6.14 (5-6).

<sup>55</sup> Reichenbach appears to have borrowed this example from McDermott 1984:13n.

The Elder, knowing that his place of abode was surrounded, slipped out through the keyhole and escaped. The thieves, not seeing the Elder that day, came back on the following day, and again surrounded the Elder's place of abode. But the Elder knew, and so he broke through the circular peak of the house and soared away into the air. Thus did the thieves attempt both in the first month and the second month to catch the Elder, but without success.

But when the third month came, the Elder felt the compelling force of the evil deed he had himself committed in a previous state of existence, and made no attempt to get away. At last the thieves succeeded in catching the Elder. When they had done so, they tore him limb from limb, and pounded his bones until they were as small as grains of rice. (DhA:B 1921:304-5)

Firstly, it should be noted that the story is not canonical, but commentarial (DhA 10.7).<sup>56</sup> Such stories, although attributed to the Buddha, were commentarial compositions of popular stories for popular edification. As **E W Burlingame**, the translator of *Buddhist Legends*, has noted, this story has an antecedent in the introduction to the Sarabhaṅga Jātaka (J 522),<sup>57</sup> “but there are important differences... Moggallāna... instead of killing his father and mother, relents at the last moment and spares their lives.”<sup>58</sup> **Keown** makes some instructive remarks here:

Apart from being uncanonical, the above account contains a number of farfetched elements, and it would therefore be unwise to regard it as an authoritative teaching on karma. Even allowing for the popular nature of the source, however, it is apparent from the account that the retribution which befell the Elder was not due simply to the operation of a blind karmic force.

On the contrary, his own free choice and conduct played a key role in his demise. His death would not have occurred as it did were it not for the fact that he “felt the compelling force of the evil deed he had himself committed in a previous state of existence, and made no attempt to get away.” If a theory of karma is sought to explain his death in these circumstances, it must surely be one which emphasizes psychological causation.

But what explanation could there be for the symmetry between crime and punishment? It might be suggested that Moggallāna was not in any sense *destined* to be killed by thieves and that the decision to deliver himself into the hands of thieves was his own. This decision, however, would almost certainly have been due to remorse—triggered by the appearance of the thieves—for the evil he himself had done in similar circumstances in the past.

(Keown 1996:342; emphases added)

Keown's explanation is very instructive except for one point: he says that Moggallāna's decision to die at the thieves' hands “would almost certainly have been due to *remorse*.” Keown does not give the Pali term here, but two of them are likely translations, that is, *vippaṭisāra* and *uddhacca*. They essentially refer to the same emotion, but while the former is more general, the latter is a technical term, referring to one of the higher fetters.<sup>59</sup> An arhat has broken all the ten fetters,<sup>60</sup> and Moggallāna is an arhat; as such,

<sup>56</sup> DhA 10.7/3:65-71. The story behind Dh 137-140.

<sup>57</sup> J 522/5:125-127.

<sup>58</sup> *Buddhist Legends* (DhA:B 2) 1921:304n.

<sup>59</sup> le the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojanā*), namely: (1) Self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rituals (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (or remorse) (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma, rāga*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*). The abandonment of the lower 5 fetters makes one a non-returner (*opapātika* or *anāgāmi*) (see **Ānāpānasati S**, M 118.10 = 7.13).

<sup>60</sup> See **Laṭukikopama S** (M 66.17/1:454), SD 28.11.

he should have had no remorse at all. Anyway, this does not in any way affect Keown's argument, except that Moggallāna, as an arhat, makes a remorseless free choice to die at the thieves' hands.

**5.3.2 The death of the miserly seth of Sāvattthī.** Reichenbach's second example (1990:20 f) is taken from **the Aputtaka Sutta 1** (S 3.19), where the rajah Pasenadi tells the Buddha how a seth (wealthy entrepreneur) of Sāvattthī had died intestate, adding that although the man was wealthy, he had lived an extremely frugal life (such as eating simple rice gruel and dressing in a three-piece hempen garment). The Buddha explains that the seth, had in a previous life done both good and bad deeds somewhat at the same time, that is, giving alms to the Pratyeka-buddha Tagara, sikkhī, but then immediately regretted (*vippaṭṭi-sārī ahoṣi*) the gift, thinking that it should have been better given to his slaves and workers. On account of this mixed karma, the seth was reborn in heaven seven times, and surplus of his karmic fruit (*vipākāvase-sa*), he was born seven times a seth in Sāvattthī. But by regretting his gift, the seth "inclined his heart to denying himself excellent food, clothes, vehicles, and the enjoyment of the five sense-objects."<sup>61</sup>

Again, this situation seems perfectly explicable in terms of a *samskāra* theory of karma. The Buddha spells out the psychological connection when he explains the man's austerity as due to the particular way he had "inclined his heart" (*citta namati*). The subject in question was clearly ambivalent: we might say he had a "complex" about wealth which manifested itself in the ability to create it but the inability to enjoy it. (Keown 1996:343; emphases added)

**5.3.3 Subhuman rebirths.** For his third example, Reichenbach (1990:20) does not quote from Buddhist sources. He simply remarks, without further comment, "There are also detailed lists of connections between specific acts and particular types of reincarnated existences."<sup>62</sup> For example, for stealing grain a person will be reincarnated as a rat, for stealing linen as a frog, and for eating forbidden food as a worm." (id). Keown gives his response:

Turning finally to Reichenbach's last group of examples, we see that the principle they illustrate is once again compatible with an account of karma in terms of *samskāras*. That an animal rebirth should come about as a result of bad moral conduct is in accordance with the principle that moral choice determines physical being. But why should the theft of grain be linked to rebirth as a rat as opposed to, say, a monkey? I suggest that in these examples allowance must be made for appeals to the popular imagination. Since stealing grain is an activity, commonly associated with rats, it is logical that rats should be chosen to illustrate the likely animal rebirth of a grain-thief. The connection between certain vices and particular animals in these cases is thus a popular illustration of the karmic principle that one becomes what one does. (Keown 1996:343; emphases added)

On this last point, we have canonical evidence by way of **the Vāseṭṭha Sutta** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), the theme of which is *we are what we do*: our occupation and preoccupation influence us in profound and far-reaching ways. [4.3]. Keown concludes:

Objections can be raised on many grounds to Reichenbach's examples, and even taken at face value, all fall a long way short of demonstrating that a supplementary theory of transpersonal *phalas* is required to explain the data in Buddhist sources. Such a hypothesis raises intractable problems in causal theory and explains so little that cannot be otherwise explained that there seems little justification for resorting to it. If the three examples above are the strongest scriptural evidence against a *samskāric* interpretation of karma, then the theory survives unscathed. None of the evidence considered so far is inconsistent with the view that karma in Buddhism is properly understood purely in terms of *samskāras*. (Keown op cit)

<sup>61</sup> S 3.20/1:91-93, SD 22.5.

<sup>62</sup> Reichenbach refers to Ludo Rocher, "Karma and rebirth in the Dharmaśāstras" [in O' Flaherty 1980:]61-89 & McDermott [1980:]177 f.



**5.4 KARMA AS CONDITIONING FACTOR.** Karma, in the Buddhist perspective, is only one component of our whole life-process, that is, the life-continuum of what is inherited from the past, the current conditions, and future possibilities. However, it is the most important factor, as it shapes us in the present and the future, our internal mental states and external conditions. In short, karma is what fashions the state and direction of our lives.

Technically, such workings of karma are called **karma-formations** (*saṅkhāra*),<sup>63</sup> that is, the second factor of dependent arising. It is a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*), as well as an “aggregate,” *khandha*, that is, the active “producing” or “generating” conditioner,<sup>64</sup> or what Payutto describes as “the agent which fashions the mind.”<sup>65</sup> As the second factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhāra* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence—as such, here best rendered as “volitional formations” or “karma-activities” to distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6). Payutto gives a helpful summary of this point in simple terms,

This refers to the factors or qualities of the mind which, with intention at the lead, shape the mind into good, evil or neutral states, which in turn fashion the thought process and its effects through body and speech. In this context, karma could be defined simply as volitional impulses. Even in this definition we still take intention as the essence, and that is why we sometimes see the word *saṅkhāra* translated simply as intention. (Payutto 1993:9)

## **6 Action and result**

Karma does not always refer to past actions. It embraces present deeds, too. Hence, in one sense, we are the result of what we were; we will be the result of what we are, ad infinitum. In another sense, we are not totally the result of what we were; we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. The present is no doubt the offspring of the past and is the parent of the future, but the present is not always a true index of either the past or the future. For instance, a criminal of today may be a saint tomorrow; a good person yesterday may be a vicious person today. In short, we are the fruit of both our past karma and present conditions.<sup>66</sup>

The result (*vipāka*) or fruit (*phala*) of karma affects different persons and different beings in different ways. Under the right conditions, we become what we have done, said and thought. Just as every solid object in the light has a shadow, even so every volitional activity is accompanied by its due effect. Karma therefore explains that our present condition is mainly due to our own past actions. It also explains why some are born poor, ugly or handicapped, while others are beautiful, wealthy and healthy. According to Buddhism, this inequality is due not only to heredity (nature) and environment (nurture), but also to karma.

**The Cūḷa Kamma,vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135) records how the youth Subha Todeyya,putta, perplexed by the seemingly inexplicable, apparent disparity that exists amongst humanity, approaches the Buddha and questions him regarding it:

What is the reason, what is the cause, Blessed One, that we find amongst mankind the short-lived and the long-lived, the diseased and the healthy, the ugly and the beautiful, the weak and the powerful, the poor and the rich, the low-born and the high-born, the ignorant and the wise?

The Buddha replies thus:

Beings are owners of karma, heirs to karma, born in karma, bound to karma, have karma as their refuge. It is karma that differentiates beings, that is to say, by way of inferiority and excellence.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> On formations, see *Saṅkhāra*, SD 17.6, esp (7).

<sup>64</sup> S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2,12) n, SD 5.10.

<sup>65</sup> Payutto 1993:9.

<sup>66</sup> However, we can only act in the present moment; for, the past is gone, and the future has not yet come.

<sup>67</sup> For similar statements on karma, see **Kukkura,vatika S** (M 57,8/1:390), SD 23.11 (3).

(M 135,3-4/2:202 f), SD 4.15

One last note on karma and its fruit. If karma bears fruit, we can somehow change its fruit, as it is a dynamic process. Karma does not work as a linear process, although certain acts may have a stronger force or effect than others. One such strong force is that of habit. If we *habitually* do bad deeds, then we would naturally harvest bad fruits.

On the other hand, the suttas repeatedly show us that even the worst hard-core bad guy is capable of spiritual liberation, that is, beginning with his getting out of the rut of badness. The best known example is the conversion and awakening of the notorious serial killer, Aṅguli,māla, whose story is recorded in **the Aṅguli.māla Sutta** (M 86).<sup>68</sup> Aṅguli.,māla's Dhammapada verse is karmically significant:

<i>Yassa pāpaṃ kataṃ kammaṃ kusalena pithīyati<sup>69</sup> so imaṃ lokam pabhāseti abbhā mutto 'va candimā</i>	A bad deed that is done, he blocks off with good [a wholesome deed], such a one brightens this world like the cloud-free moon.	(Dh 173)
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## 7 Only deed, no doer

An ignorant person might ask questions like “Who is the doer of karma? Who reaps the fruit of karma?” Before such questions can be answered, we must know that Buddhism does not teach the existence of the soul, that is, any sort of permanent entity, whether physical or non-physical. Words such as “man,” “woman,” “being,” “self,” and so forth, are only conventional terms used as referents for fleeting forms which consist of psycho-physical phenomena.

Buddhists do not believe in an unchanging entity, whatever it is called. Everything in this universe is in a state of continuous flux. There is no actor apart from the action, no perceiver apart from perception, no conscious subject apart from mere consciousness. Just as fire is not stored in fire-wood, and arises when the conditions are right, even so karma arises and fruits when the conditions are right.

Who then is the doer of karma? Who experiences the effect?<sup>70</sup>

Volition or will (cetanā) is itself the doer. Feeling (vedanā) reaps the fruits of action. Apart from these pure mental states (*suddha,dhamma*) there is none to sow and none to reap. As such, in **the Visuddhi-magga**, Buddhaghosa declares

No doer of deed is there,  
Nor one who feels the fruit,  
Only events roll on:  
This indeed is right view.

The first beginning of karma and its result,  
Going thus together with their causes,  
Cannot be known, even as (no first beginning is seen)  
Of a tree, its seed, and other things (that grow). (Vism 19.20, cf 16.90)

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<sup>68</sup> M 86/2:97-105 @ SD 5.11. Aṅguli,māla's story is found in a number of Comys (MA 3:304-319; DhA 3:169-170; ThaA 3:54-64).

<sup>69</sup> *Pithīyati* (vll *pidhīyati, pithiyyati*; pass of *pidahati*, “he covers, shuts”; BHS *pidhayatti, apidheti*, etc; Skt *api-dahati*), to be covered up, close, shut (off), obstructed (M 2:104, 3:184; Sn 1034, 1035; Nc 442; Tha 872; Dh 173; J 1:279. 2:158, 6:432). For philological analysis, see Tha:N 247 n872.

<sup>70</sup> See also **Self & Selves**, SD 26.9 (1.6.1).

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